

Wright, skepticism and entitlement

External world skeptical arguments attempt to dampen our natural confidence in perception as a reliable means of learning about the material world. According to the skeptic, for instance, we cannot know that we're not a disembodied brain in a vat, dreaming, or being controlled by an evil neuroscientist. It seems that our perception may not be a reliable representation of reality in these cases, so we cannot know anything about the material world based on our senses. As it turns out, arguing against the skeptic when considering knowledge about the material world is remarkably difficult—a better dialogue can be had by considering justification for our perceptions about the material world. In this paper, I will argue that justification for belief parallels the intuition for knowledge outlined above: in order to have justification to form beliefs on the basis of our perceptions, we must have independent justification to believe that perception is reliable. I will reconstruct Crispin Wright's argument to suggest that we can defeat the skeptic by finding an independent way to justify the belief that our perception is reliable, namely, through entitlement. Thus, independent justification to believe that our perception is reliable is necessary to justify beliefs on the basis of perception; however, we can garner this independent justification only through entitlement, a principle which does not grant us *knowledge* of reliable perception, suggesting that this method of justification is reasonable only if we sacrifice the closure principle for knowledge.

The skeptic will argue that we do not have justification to believe anything about the external world because to do so, we would need (unobtainable) justification to believe that our senses are reliable. Such an argument may be written in the following form:

- (1) I cannot justify many of my beliefs about the material world except through my senses.
- (2) But, to have justified belief about any proposition regarding the material world that I come to believe through the senses, I must be *independently* justified in believing that my senses are reliable.
- (3) I cannot be independently justified in believing that my senses are reliable.
- (4) So, I do not have justification to believe any proposition regarding the material world on the basis of my senses.

According to the skeptic, we can imagine cases where our sensory perceptions do not align with or accurately depict reality. He thinks we do not have justification to believe that these skeptical hypotheses are false except through our perhaps fallacious perceptions. Thus, he suggests that we cannot be justified in believing our perception is reliable and so are not justified to believe anything we come to think through our perceptions. The skeptic sets up this logically valid argument, with the burden on the anti-skeptic to restore confidence in our justification to believe propositions about the external world.

Crispin Wright, a 20th century British philosopher, avoids skepticism by arguing against premise (3), that we have no other independent way of justifying our belief in the reliability of our senses. Wright argues that there is a unique parallel between statements of the reliability of our perception and type-III propositions. The definition of a type-III proposition is best enumerated through an example. Consider the following Moorean argument for a material world:

- (1) My present state of mind seems to represent awareness that there are two hands in front of my face.
- (2) Here are two hands.
- (3) There is a material world.

Thus, type-III propositions may be loosely defined as generalized propositions which follow from type-I and II propositions, where the warrant provided for believing II based on I depends on III. Wright suggests that presuppositions such as “our perception is reliable” and type-III propositions like “there is a material world” must both be assumed to obtain warrant for anything else, but will not be themselves warranted at the time they must be assumed (Wright 19-20). From this, he argues that we are *entitled* to make certain presuppositions, “where P is a presupposition of a cognitive enquiry if to doubt P would be a commitment to doubting the significance or competence of the enquiry” (Wright 21); that is to say, without taking P as a given we would be unable to meaningfully consider any cognitive enquiry which presupposes P. Thus, Wright offers a way to avoid skepticism: if we are entitled to presuppose that our senses are reliable, then we have justification to believe in the reliability of our senses and premise (3) of the skeptical argument is defeated.

Wright anticipates one possible criticism of entitlement directly in its construction: that entitlement might be abused such that many presuppositions may be entitled without evidence. For instance, are we justified in believing in God, particularly if it is pragmatic to do so?¹ To avoid these claims, Wright puts forth specific guidelines for what presuppositions are also *entitlements*. A presupposition P is an entitlement only if: a) there is no enduring reason to doubt P and b) attempts at justifying P would lead to an infinite regress of attempts to justify increasingly more presuppositions, such that we would have no more reason to accept the presuppositions of each entitlement than to accept the entitlement itself. Furthermore, Wright sets up stakes that govern when one may be entitled to make a presupposition. Presuppositions may be entitled only when “failure would be no worse than

¹ This line of reasoning follows from a viewpoint akin to Pascal’s Wager – that if God does not exist and we believe in God, there are few negative consequences, but if God exists and we do not believe he does, we risk an eternity of suffering in Hell.

the cost of executing [the entitlement] and... success would be better” (Wright 21). The constraints of entitlement are constructed to limit its use to only those presuppositions which are *epistemically rational*; we must be entitled to presuppose them if we are to have justification to believe anything at all. They do not expand to include presuppositions that might be merely *practically rational*, such as belief in God, that benefit us in a pragmatic sense without being necessary for baseline epistemic justification.

However, there is a further and perhaps deeper criticism to Wright’s argument – although he adequately demonstrates that we have justification to believe our senses are reliable, does this also provide *knowledge* that our senses are reliable? If not, Wright faces the challenge of sacrificing the closure principle for knowledge in favor of entitlement. The closure principle can be stated in the following way: if S knows that P, and S knows that if P, then Q, then S knows that Q. Then according to closure:

- (I) If I know I have hands on the basis of perception, then I know perception is reliable.

Wright provides justification to believe both that perception is reliable and that one can know propositions about the material world on the basis of perception, but he does not directly address knowledge. It seems possible to know that I have hands on the basis of perception, since the belief is justified and may in theory meet whatever additional conditions are necessary for knowledge. However, Wright would likely state that we do not *know* perception is reliable, because that belief was an entitlement. Entitlements cannot grant us knowledge since they are “not standing certainties,” but instead context-dependent claims (Wright 19)—even if we are entitled to believe at any given moment that our perceptions are reliable, we cannot claim to know that perception on the whole is reliable. Thus, (I) is false and closure does not hold. Wright might argue that although we sacrifice closure for

knowledge, we do not sacrifice knowledge for justification, an intimately connected alternative. Regardless, Wright's entitlement sacrifices closure for the knowledge condition and is a fault we must accept if we agree with Wright's argument. Although I will not address the possible epistemic issues that may arise from denying closure beyond suggesting it poses some issues for deduction, it seems that Wright is reasonable in making this sacrifice: after all, without entitlement, we are once again trapped by the skeptic and unable to know anything at all on basis of perception. If we cannot make meaningful epistemic enquiries, then whether or not closure holds for knowledge becomes irrelevant because we cannot know anything at all. I would argue, then, that sacrificing closure in the knowledge condition for entitlement is itself an epistemically rational and justified move.²

The skeptic argues that we cannot be justified in forming beliefs on the basis of our perceptions without knowing on independent grounds that perception is reliable. He claims that we do not have justification on independent grounds to believe that perception is reliable. In a largely successful attempt at defeating skepticism, Crispin Wright argues that in fact we do have this justification because we are entitled to believe in the veracity of our perceptions: without making such a baseline assumption, after all, we sacrifice justification to believe and therefore to know anything at all. By accepting entitlement, however, we necessarily sacrifice the closure principle for knowledge, because entitlements are context-driven presuppositions and so cannot grant overarching knowledge. Yet this seems not to be a problem: without the epistemic justification to believe in sensory perception, we cannot know anything at all and closure for knowledge becomes an irrelevant point. So it is epistemically rational to accept entitlement as a way to argue against skepticism.

² Furthermore, as has been discussed in class, there are many issues associated with closure suggesting it is not a terrible principle to sacrifice. For instance, it does not hold that "If I know I have hands, then I know I'm not dreaming" – I might still be dreaming, despite having hands.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

24.211 Theory of Knowledge
Spring 2014

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.